

Spanish steps



Tasmanian journalist Kara Douglas explores the world of self-guided walking holidays in southern Spain



Paco greets me at the door of his family's guest house with a kiss on the hand and a torrent of Spanish, of which I don't speak a word. It doesn't matter though, as he takes my arm with a fatherly pat and shows me to my room. He stops to point out paintings, which through a steady stream of Spanish and explanatory gestures, I understand were painted by his daughter, a well-known artist. I later find out Paco himself is a retired flamenco singer who is famous throughout Spain.

After relieving me of my bags Paco ushers me upstairs to a small restaurant on the roof-top terrace for a cool drink. Tables and chairs are dotted across the terrace and golden sunlight bounces off the white-washed walls. It resembles a scene from a movie, but it's the view that steals the show.

La Seguiriya guesthouse sits perched on top of a cliff in the tiny Andalusian town of

Alhama, overlooking a stunning river gorge known as Canon de Los Tajos.

It's the gorge and the surrounding mountains of the Sierra Tejeda, in southern Spain, that have brought me half-way across the world on a one-week, self-guided hiking tour.

I'm joined a short time later by Terry, a British tour operator. The former policeman left the cold English climate and moved to the region eight years ago. He's friendly and knows the area well, offering practical advice and no-nonsense tips, which makes him the ideal counterpart to Paco's flamboyant charm.

I'm a novice to the world of walking holidays, but Terry explains that he's there to offer as much, or as little help, as I need. He runs through the itinerary and maps for each day's walk, explaining the route and what to expect along the way. I'm invited to join Terry and his wife Lisa for dinner or

for any of the walks during the week, but if I prefer I can enjoy total solitude. I opt for a bit of both.

Next morning Terry takes me on a tour around the town before I set off on my walk. Alhama emerged in prehistoric times because of its thermal hot springs and strategic position at the cross-roads of the main routes across Andalucia. Every cobbled street tells a tale of the rich, and at times dark and violent history of the once Roman, Moorish and now Christian town. The Roman bridge and baths were built in the first century, while an Arab castle lies just one street away from a 16th century Catholic church and convent. Around the corner is Inquisition House, reputed to be the first building ever used for questioning and torture during the Spanish Inquisition. Just how many people passed through the imposing gothic wooden doors, and how many came out, will never be known. The

cobbled streets and picturesque buildings of Alhama form an intriguing tapestry of the culture and history of southern Spain.

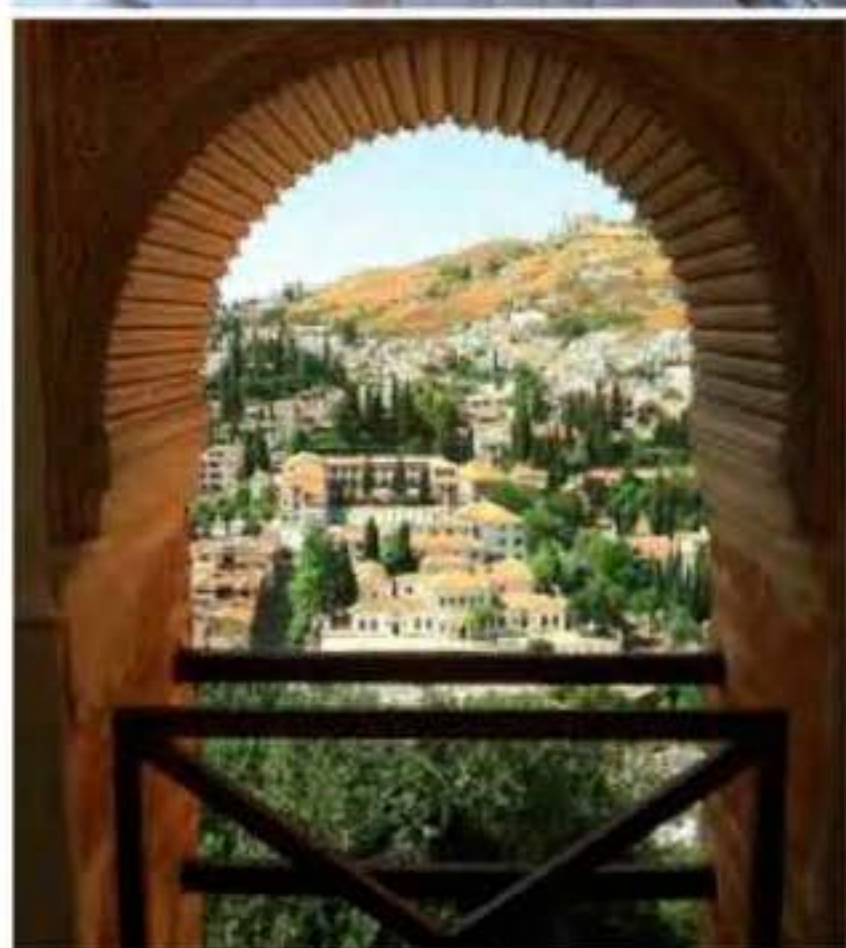
The first day's walk takes me down into the spectacular gorge on which Alhama is perched. The cobbled stairs cut into the cliff-face are in fact the roof of a secret tunnel built inside the town's walls, so the residents could access the river during a siege. As I reach the bottom I can also see the Arab dungeons built into the cliff wall centuries ago.

The seven-kilometre, two and half hour Walk of the Angels takes me along the river and through the gorge. I stop to explore the ruins of several old flour mills and cave houses built by shepherds. Eventually I reach a small chapel carved into the sandstone cliff. Known as Ermita de los Angeles, the Chapel of the Angels was built in the 1500s by a Spanish knight who survived after his horse plunged over the cliff at that exact spot. Ever since, fresh flowers and candles are lit daily inside the tiny chapel.

The path brings me out to El Ventorro, a friendly watering hole where I stop for the *menu del dia*. Most restaurants in the region serve bread, soup, a main meal, dessert and drink for around ten euros. It's the largest meal of the day, eaten in the afternoon, before siesta. I opt for a rich gazpacho soup, which is refreshingly cool in the 30 degree heat, calamari with salad, a crusty bread roll and an apple for dessert. It's the simple yet rich and flavoursome food that southern Spain is famous for.

After lunch I head back to town along the ridgeline above the gorge, passing through lush olive groves and golden wheat crops. I arrive back from my walk during siesta. Shutters are drawn and all the shops and restaurants are closed as residents escape the baking heat. Come nightfall, and the town comes alive once more. Children play in the town square while their parents sit at tables outside local tapas bars, catching up with neighbours and friends. With a population of only six thousand, most people have lived in the region for generations. Alhama is a safe, warm and inviting town. Even as a woman travelling alone, I feel comfortable walking through the streets at night, and stopping at one of the many bars for a glass of wine and some tapas, the delicious small plates of hot or cold appetisers that are such a feature of Spanish cuisine.

The first day sets the tone for the rest of the week. I spend the morning on a walk in the countryside around Alhama, before returning for a meal, a swim in the river and a siesta. The evenings are spent nursing a glass



of wine and eating tapas in the town square. Some nights I simply sit and watch the world go by, while others I try out my few words of Spanish on the patient and friendly locals.

I take one day off from walking to visit Granada, which is about an hour away. Terry and his wife Lisa drive me into town and organise my ticket for the World Heritage-listed Alhambra Palace. I spend the morning wandering the grounds of the magnificent 13th century Moorish palace. In the afternoon I head to Granada's Moroccan quarter, which began as a spice market hundreds of years ago. I stroll through the tiny streets and barter with Moroccan traders for leather goods and jewellery, before returning to Alhama with Terry and Lisa for a final balmy night of wine and tapas.

The next day I say my good-byes. With Terry acting as translator, Paco tells me he's glad I left Barcelona to see the real Spain – and so am I.

*Opposite page: Canon de los Tajos, Alhama
This page, clockwise from top left: Inside the World Heritage-listed Alhambra Palace; the quiet streets of Alhama during siesta; farmers ride into town, Alhama; shopping in Granada's Moroccan Quarter; shepherd's hut built into the gorge wall near Alhama; view over Granada from inside Alhambra Palace
All photos: Kara Douglas*